

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH COLONEL JON LEHR, COMMANDER, 4TH STRYKER BRIGADE, 2ND INFANTRY DIVISION VIA TELECONFERENCE FROM IRAQ SUBJECT: SECURITY SITUATION IN DIYALA PROVINCE TIME: 9:30 A.M. EDT DATE: FRIDAY, MAY 23, 2008

Copyright (c) 2008 by Federal News Service, Inc., Ste. 500 1000 Vermont Avenue, NW, Washington, DC 20005, USA. Federal News Service is a private firm not affiliated with the federal government. No portion of this transcript may be copied, sold or retransmitted without the written authority of Federal News Service, Inc. Copyright is not claimed as to any part of the original work prepared by a United States government officer or employee as a part of that person's official duties. For information on subscribing to the FNS Internet Service, please visit <http://www.fednews.com> or call (202)347-1400

(Note: Please refer to www.dod.mil for more information.)

CHARLES "JACK" HOLT (Chief, New Media Operations, Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense Public Affairs): Colonel Lehr?

COL. LEHR: Yeah, this is Colonel Lehr.

MR. HOLT: Very good, sir. I'm Jack, Jack Holt, DOD Bloggers Roundtable. Thanks for joining us this morning, sir. I think we're ready to go when you are.

COL. LEHR: Yes.

MR. HOLT: So if you've got an opening statement, we're ready.

COL. LEHR: Yeah, I do, Jack. Let me convey that statement and then I'll open the floor for questions. To all who's assembled there, good morning. I'm Colonel Jon Lehr, the 4th Stryker Brigade, 2nd Infantry Division, the brigade commander. And we're based out of Fort Lewis, Washington. And we're currently operating in Diyala Province.

Our brigade arrived, well, 14 months ago, April 2007, as part of the five brigades in support of the surge operation. And we are the fourth of the fifth surge brigades to redeploy. Our redeployment from Iraq is part of a planned surge strategy in the campaign plan that maps out eventual conduct of independent Iraqi Security Force operations.

We've been extremely successful during our occupancy in Baghdad, Baghdad Northern Belt and Diyala Province. Operations in concert with the Iraqi Security Forces have made the province a safer and more stable area, providing a place for the government and civil services to conduct business and for the Iraqi people to live and work.

Establishing a secure environment was paramount in the continued success of Diyala, where we're currently operating. We accomplished this through 10 large-scale offensive operations. The most noteworthy is Raider Harvest, which focuses on the city of Muqadadiyah and the associated area, referred to as the bread basket. That's a perfect example of the type of operation we've been conducting.

We continuously targeted and crippled the infrastructure of the enemy and their leadership. For example, the unit has removed over 220 high-value individuals, high-value targets, from the population. We have captured, detained and processed over 1,700 insurgents. We have killed over 500 insurgents.

We fired thousands of rounds to destroy enemy safe havens and hinder their logistical means. The unit has successfully cleared 25,000 miles of roadways, cleared over 2,100 IEDs, and discovered and confiscated over 550 weapons caches. Overall, Diyala has seen a 70 percent reduction in violence over the past year.

In order to maintain the security created by coalition forces and Iraqi Security Forces, the Sons of Iraq program was implemented; also referred to as the Concerned Local Citizens. The premise of the program is to contract local Iraqi males to provide security for their villages and neighborhoods as augmentation to security forces.

The effect of this is three-fold. First, it drives al Qaeda from areas where they formerly enjoyed sanctuary. Two, they free up combat -- by employing them, they free up combat power from the security forces. And then, third, the short-term employment of Sons of Iraq provided a jump-start to local economies.

Overall, the Sons of Iraq played an integral role in the improved security situation in Baghdad and Diyala Province and has increased the economic activities. We continue to help build the Iraqi Security Forces. The 5th Iraqi Army Division is capable of conducting unilateral operations with little assistance. They are a strong force with four brigades, consisting of about 11,000 men, and their number continues to grow. Due to their success, we have moved into a tactical overwatch mode of operation where we follow the Iraqi army and support as needed.

The Iraqi police are also gaining in strength and efficiency. We have partnered with, trained and supported 17,300 Iraqi police in Diyala Province. That's 64 stations and 12 separate district headquarters. A Minister of Interior academy recently graduated its first class, and that is one we stood up here in Diyala Province, and it will yield approximately 500 Iraqi policemen a month and approximately 6,000 per year as a through-put.

They are working hard to create a better force, simply stated, a force that is non-sectarian, non-corrupt. Staff Major General Gonnum (sp), the provincial director of police, has arrested or fired more of those that have been positively identified and participating in extremist militia activity. He has also removed officers for their failure to address the problems of extremist militia within their commands. Overall, the transition to Iraqi security forces has been successful but continues and is a slow and deliberate process.

Now, the relatively safe and stable environment provided traction for the provincial government and civil services to re-establish their organizations. We have seen a 25 percent increase in electricity provided to the Iraqi people in western Diyala and a 125 percent increase in fuel capacity. Diyala has opened its first private bank with ATM and electronic funds transfer capability. The provincial government has planned and executed their provincial budget. All of these things speak volumes to what we have accomplished and what the Iraqi people have accomplished, and that's probably -- the latter statement is probably the most important thing.

But these accomplishments came at a price. The brigade has lost 55 soldiers, and over 400 were wounded in action while in country. I want to extend my heartfelt condolences to the families and friends of the fallen soldiers. It has really been an honor, a true honor and a privilege to be their commander and serve beside them.

At this point I'll open the floor for any questions that you all might have.

MR. HOLT: All right, thank you very much, sir.

Spencer, you were first on line, so why don't you get us started?

Q Thanks very much.

Colonel, congratulations on the success of your mission. And I'm happy to say we can welcome you guys home soon. I wanted to talk to you about one quick thing with the Sons of Iraq program. Colonel Sutherland was on this forum, I believe, around November, and he mentioned how occasionally he had to arrest some members of what were then called the CLCs for seemingly taking over certain areas rather than necessarily helping you guys against al Qaeda or succeed in your mission.

Could you talk a little bit about what you do to ensure that the Sons of Iraq don't become the next warlords of Iraq? And then -- I'd appreciate that, thanks.

COL. LEHR: Absolutely. And that's a good question. Let me provide some context. First off, we employ about 9,000 CLCs, or Sons of Iraq. And we are -- it was above or it was rapidly approaching 10,000. We have been -- there has been a ceiling emplaced on the number, so we are calling out the contracts that are no longer required because the security in the area is not necessary.

We've caused the contractors, the individual contractors, to reduce the amount of Sons of Iraq they employ in certain areas. So now we're getting it down closer to 8,000. We're currently at the 9,000 CLC/Sons of Iraq level across the province.

Not all Sons of Iraq are created equal. There are two distinct groups. One is mainly associated with the rural area, and it's more tribally based; in my opinion, easier to work -- (inaudible) -- because they're not -- (inaudible) -- or political parties. The ones in the major urban areas, particularly Baqubah, which Dave Sutherland was referring to, are politically aligned.

There were four major groups operating -- political groups operating in Baqubah that employed CLCs -- Suladdin (sp), 1920 Revolutionary Brigade, Mujaheddin, and Hamas of Iraq. They have confederated themselves recently into more of, as I suggested, a confederated organization referred to as the People's Committee.

Now, with that said, to get at the heart of your question, the approach remains on targeting the bad individuals. It comes down to sources and other technical means that we have to figure out who the bad people are, the bad CLCs, bad Sons of Iraq, the ones that are supporting crime, supporting sectarian violence or supporting al Qaeda, and we detain them.

My guess is right now we're right around 60 or so that we have pulled out of the program, maybe upwards of 100. I don't have that particular statistic, but my sensing is we've detained at least 60 that were considered bad actors and we removed them. So it's a self-cleansing process. We keep an eye on them, because many of them had former insurgent ties, and we recognize that. However, many more of them are very patriotic and are central to our strategy on how we're approaching security in Diyala Province.

Q Thank you.

MR. HOLT: Okay. And Eric.

Q Thanks, Jack. Good morning, Colonel Lehr. I think the security gains in Diyala have been enormous, and I just want to thank you for that. But my question is in regard to the remaining enemy system in your area. It seems like there are still pockets of enemy activity east of Tanbanisad (sp) and up to Baqubah and out to Balad Ruz, and then in the Jalula area north of Lake Hamran (sp).

Can you talk a little bit about the remaining enemy fighters in your area? And do you foresee more of the type of large-scale offensive operations that you mentioned earlier?

COL. LEHR: That's another great question, one that I just sat down and was discussing with some new incoming leaders. Let me define how I see the enemy situation. We have worked a series -- we have worked very methodically, first off, trying to avoid what -- you intuitively will understand this statement. We're trying avoid whacking a mole, or Whac-a-Mole, jumping all over the province.

Baqubah is decisive. From Baqubah, emanating out from Baqubah, we have conducted a strategy of clear, hold and tactical build in a series of concentric rings working outward from Baqubah, focusing on the Diyala River, the Upper Diyala River, the Lower Diyala River Valley, the Tigris and the Udane (sp) River Valley. It forms like a Y with each end touching the Y being Baqubah.

So with that said, we've worked very diligently. And clearing is one thing, but holding the ground is another. And that's where the CLC/Sons of Iraq part of the strategy is very important. You can clear an area, but if you can't hold it, it's all for naught.

Now, with that said, I see the problem areas as a couple. Banizaid, which is southeast of Baqubah, southeast of Baritz (sp) -- if you look at Baqubah, it's divided by the Diyala River. Southeast of it, 20 to 30 kilometers to the south and to the southeast, is the Banizaid tribal area. We are pushing al Qaeda further and further to the southeast out of that area. However, historically, Banizaid has been sympathetic to the Sunni insurgency and al Qaeda. So that's a tough one down there.

Further east, south of Balad Ruz, is another al Qaeda -- (inaudible) -- in what we refer to as the --

(Sound of dog barking.)

MR. HOLT: Okay.

COL. LEHR: Okay -- what we refer to as the Turkey area, south -- about 15 to 20 kilometers south of Balad Ruz. We're currently conducting operations there now in the approach that I suggested to you.

Coming north and northeast of Balad Ruz in the Nida (sp) -- I'm sorry, the Nida (sp) is how it's actually pronounced -- the Nida (sp) tribal area, Nida (sp) tribe, has a strong al Qaeda presence, a fairly strong al Qaeda presence, and it's embedded within the tribe. And then to the east of the Hamrans (sp) and the Jalula-Sendiya (sp) area is another enclave of al Qaeda.

Now, one way to look at this is if they're out there, so what? It's very austere living. They are not having a huge effect on the decisive effort around maintaining Baqubah and Muqdadiah. However, we see that as the next leg of the campaign strategy.

Now, I've just covered the Sunni extremists. There's another threat out there, somewhat more subtle, and that is the Shi'a extremists. They're the Iranian influence, JAM special groups, Jaish al-Mahdi special groups. I'm pretty sure you're aware what's going on in Sadr City. That's not my area. I won't comment on that because I don't really have great knowledge. I just know things are going really well. The Iraqi army is in the lead down there.

We have not seen a lot of Shi'a extremist activity against coalition forces in Diyala Province, but one thing that we have noted that we can quickly become victims of our own success, meaning the more effective we are against al Qaeda, the more we open the door for Shi'a extremism; maybe not directly focused on coalition forces, but sectarian violence.

We're creating -- we've got to watch and we have to monitor this constantly, creating the conditions for Shi'a to conduct sectarian violence against the Sunnis that are left behind after we clear al Qaeda out. And so this is a natural -- it's almost a self-licking ice cream cone in that you really have to maintain balance, because if you clear -- if you're successful against al Qaeda, it invites Shi'a extremism in, in a sectarian violence way, and then that just invites the Sunni insurgency back to counter that. So it's a very, very complex and difficult set of circumstances, and it's one that we keep our eye on constantly.

So in summary -- I'm sorry I got a bit long-winded -- we see the threats about, if you can imagine, two or three concentric circles out from Baqubah; as I described to you, Banizaid, Turkey area, Nida (sp), and up east of Hamran (sp) Lake right now. And our plans for the next 90 to 180 days, the unit that is coming in behind us is going to conduct operations out there.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir, thank you very much.

And Christopher.

Q Yeah, real quick. There's another unit coming in to replace you when you leave? Is that true?

COL. LEHR: I'm sorry, I couldn't hear your question. Q Hi. Is there another unit coming in to replace you when you guys leave? What's the plan for Baqubah or for Diyala after you guys leave?

COL. LEHR: Yes, there is an organization that is repositioning and will take our battle space from us. And it's currently part of the NNCI, the

Corps' campaign plan. And they are repositioning from different places in Iraq. The organization was task-organized. Their battalions and squadrons were task-organized with other brigade combat teams. They're coming back together, and they are currently conducting what we refer to as right seat/left seat rides, familiarization of the area of operation.

Q And then I think you've answered some of my questions already, but from kind of a higher level, what do you see as the reasons for your success there? What did al Qaeda and the insurgents do wrong, and what do you think you guys did right, the lessons you're going to maybe pass on to your next group that's coming in?

COL. LEHR: Yeah, that's a good question. I think al Qaeda has done a lot wrong. I think their brutal, heavy-handed tactics in how they are attacking innocent civilians -- we've noticed a lot of their focus now is on killing, with spectacular attacks, Sons of Iraq, the people that are maintaining security in their respective areas, and Iraqi Security Forces.

And essentially they have served to separate themselves from their base of support, the population. You know, a typical insurgency, the base of support comes from the population.

Well, their heavy-handed and brutal tactics have served to, I think, sever that relationship or separate themselves.

Now, on the reverse side of the coin, what kind of approach did we take? Well, three-pronged. It was disintegration of the insurgents' capability. We focused a lot on targeting insurgent and militia leaders, killing and capturing them. We focused on eroding the insurgent and the militias' resources, capturing weapons, ammunition, and those means and resources to prosecute their fight.

And then, third, every angle that we could attempt to separate the insurgent from the population through non-lethal measures, through civil-military operations, through non-lethal engagements, or, quite simply, number one and two, disintegration and erosion lead to confidence in the population, which serves to separate the insurgent from the population. The more confident the population became, the easier it was for us to do things because they were giving us information. They were telling us where the enemy was. They were telling us where the cache is.

So that is an approach that I am fully convinced works in counterinsurgency operations -- targeting the leadership, targeting these resources, and then trying to separate his support base from him.

MR. HOLT: Okay. And Colin.

Q I'm wondering, sir, as you go towards your redeployment home what kind of shape the people -- (audio break) -- are in and how much assistance you think they're going to need when they get home.

COL. LEHR: The first part of your question was deleted out with some type of electronic noise. Did you say my soldiers, what kind of help they're going to need on the backside of this deployment? Was that the gist of your question?

Q Exactly.

COL. LEHR: Yeah. It's already started. One thing that the Army has learned in the past five years is the backside of the deployment is probably the most significant, because there are soldiers that are going to go home that are very tired. Some of them may have some psychological issues.

But we learned -- and I think one thing that I'm very happy that we did, we started shaping the situation prior to deployment. We started -- (inaudible) -- some of the things that they would encounter, hopefully providing them some context of what it's like to be in a fight and preparing them for loss of life and loss of -- people being seriously wounded and that.

We also did a baseline -- a mental, psychological, and physical baseline prior to deploying. So now we have data points, so to speak, to refer to to see if there's any anomaly or there's any significant variation off of those data points when we go back.

As soon as we get back, every soldier, to include myself on down, goes through a reintegration program. A lot of it will be -- consist of these evaluations. Counseling will be made available, both marriage counseling and other types of counseling for those soldiers who are identified or who have asked for the assistance.

And then it comes down to -- I'm a firm believer in just good old-fashioned leadership. Leaders paying attention, keeping their head in the game, watching their soldiers that they know very well and just applying good leadership will prevent a lot of unfortunate things from happening.

One of the things we'll always confront is the whole -- a lot of soldiers will go home and drink and maybe make poor decisions about driving or buying motorcycles and that, so it all comes down to good leadership. So I feel confident the systems are in place.

Will we potentially face some problems? Yeah, we will. I'm convinced of it. But it's how we deal with those problems, I think, is the mark of a good unit and I think we're prepared to do that.

Q All right. Thank you, sir.

MR. HOLT: Okay. Jarred, still with us?

And Noah?

Q Yeah, I'm here.

MR. HOLT: Okay, Noah.

Q Hey, Colonel, it's Noah Shachtman from "Wired" magazine.

I remember spending some time with you last year and you talked about how much you believed in the power of artillery to really persuade the local population to not work with insurgents and to work with coalition forces. And so I wonder now, nine months later, if you still hold that view and if you guys are still using artillery to the extent you were last fall? COL. LEHR: Well, that's a great question and one I like talking about. Eleven thousand five hundred rounds, I still believe in the carrot and stick, based on the propensity of this culture to -- how they deal with power and authority.

And it goes back to -- it serves a couple purposes, the whole terrain denial piece. One, we deny terrain to insurgents, (movement ?) routes, IED placement, those types of things. But it also sends a significant message when we start concentrating on a particular area for four or five days at 75 to 100 rounds a day in a given area, it has a profound impact on the population.

Just like if I would start shooting artillery around your neighborhood. We always do the collateral damage assessments and we will not -- we have mathematical formulas that we know the effect, the physical effect of the round going off on anything nearby. So that's not an issue, but it's just the psychological impact.

If I would start shooting artillery around your neighborhood, it would quickly get your attention and cause you to start asking questions. Why are they doing this? And most of the time, 99 percent of the time they know why we're doing it.

We just received a series of IEDs that damaged vehicles, hurt our soldiers, et cetera. So they quickly get the message. And I've seen at least six separate times where it brought tribal leadership to the table, and they say, okay, we understand what you're doing and we're willing to help you.

I think it's just another tool in the kitbag, lethal, non-lethal kitbag. And you've heard the expression "carrot and stick," and I believe -- I'm convinced that it works pretty well in most situations in this culture.

Q May I ask a backup to that? It's Colin.

COL. LEHR: Sure. Yes.

Q A follow-up, I mean.

Sir, my colleague, Christian Lowe, talked to guys in your unit about the Mobile Gun system. And our understanding was that they were not in love with it. Can you tell us a little bit about how you've assessed its utility and what you'd like to see changed or improved?

COL. LEHR: Yeah. There was one part of your question I want to make sure I heard -- I didn't hear. It was right before your last sentence, what I perceive needed -- (inaudible) -- it was something about something my soldiers said about it, and then I couldn't hear right after that. Q Yeah, my colleague, Christian Lowe, was out with your guys earlier this year talking to them about the Mobile Gun systems. And I wondered what you think has -- what could be improved on Mobile Gun, whether it's an effective system, and why.

COL. LEHR: Yeah. I thought you may have provided some comment on what the soldiers were saying, and I was curious.

It's funny that you mention this. I just signed a letter to the Department of the Army, and to boil a two-page memorandum down into one sound bite, I said to the Army, it has its warts, but it is clearly a piece of equipment and a capability we need in the Stryker brigades. We need to maintain it.

Now, the subliminal message is Department of the Army, we need to work out some of these warts, and that's the essence of your question. What are some of the warts.

A couple of the things -- and it's not huge. A couple of the problems were associated with the coax machine gun, feeding problems with the coax machine gun.

Q Right.

COL. LEHR: The cooling system inside the MGS had a significant impact on both soldier and electronics. Soldiers just -- 130-, 135- degree heat inside there, couldn't operate long periods of time, and that type of heat had an impact on the electronics inside there.

There was also, as I recall, some problems with the main gun system. I can't remember the particulars on that. It's been about a year since I've talked about it. There were a few things that we need to improve, but clearly the message resonates.

You ask a soldier, okay, I got all your problems. Do you want to take it to combat with you the next time? And they say, absolutely, we do.

Q All right.

COL. LEHR: So it is one of those systems that we want to keep in the Stryker formation.

Q Can I have one more? You guys have Land Warrior. What did you think?

COL. LEHR: Awesome. The Land Warrior migrated out of the one battalion that we designed at the test battalion, which was 49 Infantry. It migrated to 138 Infantry. We put it on their time- sensitive target force, their scout platoon. My brigade TAC team leaders and my brigade TAC had it and used it and employed it. The 21 Cav, one troop, company-sized element was outfitted with it, so it migrated across the BCT.

I understand that the Fifth Brigade, Second Infantry Division Stryker at Fort Lewis is getting the entire -- is having the entire brigade, at least the -- (inaudible) -- outfitted with it.

I think it's a great piece of gear. It integrates nicely with the ground -- it's a ground-based system for dismounted soldiers. It links nicely to the mounted version of the Army battle command and control system.

Q It does --

COL. LEHR: I think it's just -- it is a great capability.

Q No problems? COL. LEHR: Is there problems with it? I think 49 Infantry is probably better qualified to talk about that. It does not have as many problems as you might have heard on MGS, because one thing the program manager did and did well was for the two-year testing period -- or the two years previous to this, I should say -- every innovative solution that we suggested, they've implemented somehow, some way. They even lightened the weight a bit. So I think there's probably very few warts on it anymore.

Now, there are some components that just aren't necessary, and we kind of eliminated them. The optic, the day optic that they had on there --

Q Right. That was the one I heard about.

COL. LEHR: -- it really actually degrades our ability to conduct marksmanship, to shoot accurately, because it's -- I can't get into, or I won't discuss the details of it, but we have optics that are better than that right now.

So we kind of got rid of that. We didn't use that as a component to the overall system. So there were things like that we've kind of eliminated from the system, and now what we've got is pretty functional.

And also, I wrote a letter to the Department of the Army -- (inaudible) -- this, it should be a minimum -- as a minimum should be part of the Stryker brigade's kit, and I would recommend it be permeated throughout the Army. And I believe they're doing that, an upgraded version of it.

MR. HOLT: Okay, sir.

Well, Colonel Lehr, thank you very much for joining us. I know you've got a jam-packed schedule today and we've kind of run over our time here.

We appreciate you being with us, and would like to welcome you home, sir. Thank you very much.

COL. LEHR: Well, thank you, and you're welcome, quite welcome. I'm glad I could share some information with you. Thank you.

MR. HOLT: Thank you.

END.